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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [KISL](#) [SOCI](#) [SCUL](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ISLAMOFEMINISM: FINDING A FEMINIST AUDIENCE IN  
ALGERIA

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Two recent American Bar Association (ABA) seminars on sharia law held in Algiers and Oran featured lectures using the theological tenets of Islam to support arguments in favor of gender equality. The lectures, by Islamic feminist scholar and Richmond University law professor Hazizah al-Hibri, reached an audience largely comprised of women lawyers from around the country, including Algiers, Blida, Setif, and Bejaia. Al-Hibri defended her points by citing the Qur'an and sharia law rather than relying on modern interpretations of feminism and Islam. Her views blending sharia law and secular concepts of government represented a novel approach in contrast to more conservative Islamist thinkers in Algeria, who generally stress Islam's incompatibility with modern governance. Moderate-conservative views like hers may find an audience here, particularly among Algeria's female professional cadre.  
END SUMMARY.

DEMOCRACY IN HEAVEN  
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12. (U) Hazizah Al-Hibri, a Fulbright scholar and law professor at Richmond University, spoke at two ABA-sponsored events in Algeria on the theme of gender equality in the Muslim world. Al-Hibri is the founder and president of a Muslim-women lawyers' organization called Karamah, which addresses human rights issues for Muslims. She began her presentations by exploring Islamic cultural traditions and religious hierarchies, and by describing the democratic foundations of the first Islamic community, supporting her claim with direct references to the Qur'an. For example, she referred to Qur'anic passages related to the relationship between angels and God as proof that Islam and democracy are compatible institutions. She argued that, according to the Qur'an, angels do not sin, but they argue with God. That shows us that "there is democracy, even in heaven."

ISLAM'S MODERN COMPATIBILITY  
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13. (U) Al-Hibri also outlined her interpretation of the Islamic world view and its relationship to modern society. She argued that sharia law and modern societies are not incompatible, and that states must only satisfy two conditions to meet Islamic standards. First, she said, the political process must be based on elections (baya't) and the elective and governing processes must be based on broad deliberation (shura). Secondly, she argued, states must protect the dignity of all people. Again quoting the Qur'an,

she explained that because God gives dignity to all people, human institutions must also treat all people with dignity. Accordingly, she argued, men and women alike deserve to be treated with equal justice. "If you read the Qur'an, you will understand that everything is about el-mizan (balance)," Al-Hibri insisted. To illustrate this balance, Al-Hibri further outlined her conception of women's rights in Islamic societies, emphasizing that equality in marriage is a necessary element of any such discussion. "Marriage is not a service contract," she said. "You are not hiring a cook or someone to wash your dishes. You are getting a companion."

¶4. (U) Al-Hibri also made the case that gender equality is found in Islam's theological tenets. She used the Islamic tale of the creation of Satan as a parable of gender prejudice. In the story, Satan, who was originally one of God's angels, refuses to bow down to man, God's latest creation. He became arrogant, Al-Hibri said, because he was made of fire while man was made of mere clay, and Satan would not bow down before a creature made of clay. Al-Hibri argued that Satan's sin was to believe in his superiority over man, and thus, she extrapolated, there is an equal sin in believing in the superiority of one's own gender over another. She concluded, "Regardless of race and heritage, we all have the same metaphysical origin. Do not be like Satan; do not think you are better because you are one thing and someone else is another. That goes for both male and female."

COMMENT

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¶5. (SBU) Although al-Hibri's academic credentials are impressive, her theological views were the primary draw for much of the audience. A lawyer from the court in Bejaia told us, "This is the first time that I have encountered a true feminist whose arguments come from the Holy Qur'an." Sabrina Ouared, Secretary General of the female advocacy group SOS Femmes en Detresse, also explained to us, "It is extremely rare to encounter such a modern perspective on sharia law."

¶6. (SBU) Al-Hibri's discussion of sharia law and its compatibility with modern concepts of governance is a noteworthy departure from the views expressed by other conservative Islamist voices in Algeria. Much of the conservative religious discourse here, espoused by clerics like Ali Ferkous and Abderrahmane Chibane of the Muslim Scholars Association, emphasizes the incompatibility of Islamic tenets with modernity and secular government. In his most recent fetwa interpreting sharia law, Ferkous said that democratic regimes represent "the ways of the non-believers," and that "such regimes attempt to replace the sovereignty of the Creator and His right to absolute legislation." But while these "mainstream" Algerian religious scholars may be promoting a very conservative brand of Islam tinged with anti-democratic or anti-Western sentiment, the audiences drawn to al-Hibri's lectures may indicate that there is room in Algeria for other viewpoints also based on tradition and which promote a more balanced concept of gender relations, in this case.

PEARCE